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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 003220

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND NEW
IDEAS ON THE GROUND

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 154 (CHAVALIT FOLDS WHO'S DEALING NOW?)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3033 (CHAVALIT EXITS QUICKLY)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2871 (PEACE TALKS IN INDONESIA)

[1](#)D. BANGKOK 2181 (UNKNOWN GROUP CALLS A CEASE-FIRE)

[1](#)E. BANGKOK 2255 (THAI OFFICIALS BRIEF DIPLOMATS)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B, D)

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (C) On an early October trip to southern Thailand, we observed a robust but low profile security presence and an atmosphere that subjectively appeared less tense. The Deputy Commander of the Royal Thai Police in Yala told us that the number of insurgents willing to conduct operations in Yala was dwindling, and the province was more secure than in previous months. The vice governor of Yala also felt the situation had improved recently, and speculated that the improvement was due to increased trust and cooperation from villagers who were feeling the benefits of a greater stake in governance. A group of academics from educational institutions in the deep south told us that any apparent drop in the violence was likely to be only transitory if the government was unable to take action to ameliorate the sense of powerlessness felt by Malayu-Muslims in southern Thailand.

Recognizing the scant political interest in Bangkok in the violence in the South, these academics are working on a political construct for alleviating the conditions that are driving the violence based on community self-empowerment within a special administrative zone. They also noted an increasing interest among NGOs and international organizations in the conflict, and commented that the U.S. had an image problem; one International Visitor (IV) returnee offered his assistance in addressing the latter challenge.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Although our interlocutors in southern Thailand all report that the situation in the South has improved recently, it is unclear whether the South is truly more secure; the number of people killed on a monthly basis has not changed significantly. It is clear, however, that a large number of people inside the government, the security services, and academia have a solid understanding of the issues feeding the insurgency and are working on ideas to

deal with them. All these efforts, however, will eventually need support from a national government currently distracted by the political drama in Bangkok. We hope these provincial level efforts will be allowed the time, authority, and resources to build the capacity to move reconciliation forward should the time come when Thailand has a government that is prepared to tackle the southern problem with the requisite seriousness. End Summary and Comment.

While Bangkok is Preoccupied, the Insurgency Continues

13. (C) According to Deep South Watch at Prince of Songkhla University, the frequency of violent incidents in the deep south is trending down, implying a possible improvement in the security situation. Since August 2007, violent incidents associated with the insurgency have averaged around 100 per month, down from a pre-August 2007 monthly average of about 1200. The actual number of people killed on a monthly basis, however, has not changed dramatically since the beginning of 2008, and the trend (ref e) of attacks becoming more lethal has continued. In September, according to statistics from the Isara news service, 55 people died in 94 violent incidents, for a death per incident rate of 0.581. For comparison, in all of 2007, the rate was 0.428, and for the first six months of 2008, it was 0.5349.

14. (C) In early October, poloff traveled to the deep south for discussions with provincial officials, academics, and NGOs to see what may have changed in the security situation since our last visit in May, and whether the changes in the violence statistics reflected any developments on the ground. In travels through Pattani, Songkhla, and Yala, we found an atmosphere that appeared less tense than in May. We

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observed no convoys of military vehicles or motorcycle patrols. Downtown Yala was filled with pedestrians, and markets that had been at the center of previous bomb attacks were packed with people doing business. In Pattani, the shops and restaurants surrounding the C.S. Pattani hotel, the site of a major bombing last March, were busy into the night, which was a change from our previous trip when shops were shuttered up tight immediately after dark. There were, however, many more police and military checkpoints along the roads, and what appeared to be semi-permanent military encampments alongside schools and temples.

Police Efforts in Yala

15. (C) In an effort to explain the security situation in Yala, Col. Charoon Khachasith, Deputy Commander of the Yala Provincial Police, asserted that there was less violence than in previous months. He said the security forces were confident they were making progress in dealing with the security situation and insisted the police were instituting new procedures to seek court orders prior to making arrests, and basing arrests on forensic evidence gleaned from seized weapons and explosives. Charoon said there continued to be issues of trust between police forces in Yala and the local civilian population, but he maintained this situation was improving and that they were getting better cooperation from locals. He also admitted that better cooperation with the local population came with its own challenges, one of which was protecting people who did cooperate. Noting press reporting on the large number of Muslims being assassinated, he said the majority of police sources were village leaders who were trying to help and local village defense volunteers and who were open about their involvement with the police. These people were constantly in danger - in no small part because of their own openness about working with the police.

16. (C) Charoon claimed that while the police were working to gain the trust of the civilian population, the real factor limiting the violence in Yala was the diminishing number of

insurgents with an ability to carry out attacks; he said the insurgents were unable to recruit fast enough to replace the losses they were suffering in armed clashes and arrests. To illustrate his point, he described a September 18 clash in the Muang district of Yala in which two insurgents were killed. According to Charoon, one of the two was a major bomb producer. He said since the clash, there have been no bombings in the district. (Note: According to Thai press, a gun battle in the Muang district of Yala between police and insurgents left two militants dead, and one police officer wounded. The press reports described the insurgents as core leaders in Yala. Although we have no reason to doubt Charoon,s assertion that the police in Yala are gathering more forensic evidence prior to making arrests, we have not seen this evidence used in prosecutions. End note.)

17. (C) Charoon did not believe the violence in Yala had grown more vicious or random, as reported in some press sources, and contended that much of the reporting was missing the point. According to Charoon, many of the apparently "random" targets are actually victims of circumstance: people who stumble into an area where insurgents were planning or carrying out operations, and those who did not heed warnings to avoid certain areas. This was often why rubber tappers were killed; they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, he explained. Insurgents continued to see teachers, government officials, and people who cooperated with the authorities as fair targets; they generally surveilled these targets for several days before assassinating them. Charoon ended the meeting by claiming that a large, un-quantified proportion of the violence had little to do with the insurgency but was due to crime, personal vendettas, and politics. He also asserted that narcotics, while a problem among youth in the South, did not play a major role in funding the insurgency or feeding the violence.

A Glimmer of Hope: community empowerment?

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18. (C) Grisada Boonraj, vice governor in charge of security affairs in Yala, also asserted that Yala was quieter than in previous months and credited increased local cooperation for the improvement. Refraining from discussing conditions in the neighboring provinces of Narathiwat or Pattani or offering statistics, Grisada said the improvement in the security situation may be due to provincial level efforts in Yala that focused on devolving some governing authority to the local village level. He said it was beyond the power of the provincial level authorities to fight the hard-core elements in the insurgency committing the violence, or to solve the many political conflicts that may be fueling the fighting. He said the provincial authorities could, however, try to remedy the "unfair treatment" many Muslims in southern Thailand based their grievances on, and to undercut the conditions that violent militants exploited.

19. (C) At the center of Grisada,s efforts is a scheme that gives local citizens a bigger stake in how they are being governed. He said each village in Yala was establishing a committee composed of a local religious leader, the village headman, and a representative of the tambon administrative organization. (Note: A tambon is a sub-district level administrative body. Its governing body, the tambon administrative organization, is composed of appointed and elected members. End Note) The committee was empowered to work with local citizens and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to establish rules and regulations that enable them to deal with issues such as local crime, drug abuse, and personal conflicts without involving the police or MOI officials. He said the goal was to give these committees the power and resources to resolve local problems so security personnel did not become involved. Grisada said the police were cooperating with this scheme, but the army was having a harder time buying into it because they were afraid it would

lead to a loss of state control. Grisada was convinced that these committees were behind the increase in local cooperation with officials in Yala. He credited one such committee with recently convincing 12 teenagers associated with the insurgency to turn themselves in to provincial authorities. (According to Grisada, they were recruited when they were age seven).

¶10. (C) Moving on to another aspect of his scheme, Grisada said he was searching for a way to reach "at-risk" youth in the province. He said many families in Yala were poor and had many children. This often resulted in parents having only limited control of their children, particularly if both parents worked. The problem was compounded when families were caught up in the violence and one of the parents was either arrested, injured or killed. Grisada's remedy is to establish a series of youth centers in tambons and villages to reach out to this "at-risk" population. He said the centers would offer activities, vocational training, and counseling to keep the kids out of the insurgency, and away from drugs and crime. He acknowledged these centers, which were still in the idea phase, would need to be closely integrated into villages and tambons in order for villagers to trust them, and not be seen as yet another attempt by the Thai government to assimilate Muslim youth into Thai culture.

¶11. (C) Grisada said the Islamic committees in Yala had only been marginally helpful in his efforts. He said most committee members were afraid to cooperate with him, and a local political conflict was compounding the problem: local clerics in the Yala Islamic Committee were unhappy with academics from Yala Islamic University (YIU) and Prince of Songkhla University (PSU) who were becoming involved in local issues. He said YIU and PSU had worked with him to put together a book explaining Islamic teaching in a way that dispelled the assertions of radical clerics in the South who were using Islam to justify the insurgent violence. The local clerics objected to the project on the grounds that the academics were essentially outsiders trying to tell them how to practice Islam. According to Grisada, this should not be interpreted as an endorsement by the local clerics of the

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insurgency, but rather a reaction to outside influence.

Academics have a Plan (and advice)

¶12. (C) At an academic roundtable we hosted at the C.S. Pattani hotel, Srisomphop Kitphiromsi and Ibrahim Narongraksakhet from PSU Pattani, Dr. Sukri Langbu-te from YIU, and Ayub Pathan, journalist and former head of the Isara news service, dissected the political situation in Bangkok with regards to the southern insurgency. The group was keenly aware that the political turmoil in Bangkok left little room for any high level political focus on southern Thailand; they all agreed that the fracas in the capital had little meaning for Malayu Muslims in the South. Ayub Pathan pointed out that the limited violence Bangkok had experienced through police efforts to open the parliament on October 7 (2 deaths) was minor compared with what happened on a daily basis in southern Thailand. He speculated that, given the current news environment in Bangkok, the insurgents would need to do something truly big to get into the headlines.

¶13. (C) All participants roundly discounted former Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyuth's rhetoric about brokering a peaceful solution to the insurgency (ref B), and said Chavalit's southern network was not really relevant anymore. They were equally dismissive of the reports of multiple tracks of negotiations (refs B-D). They generally believed there was a core group leading the insurgency, and that no one who mattered had been involved in any of the negotiating tracks. Both Srisomphop and Ayub acknowledged that the security situation was better than it was a year

ago, but claimed that it meant little for the actual resolution of the conflict: this was a lull, and the violence would come roaring back once the insurgents, whose networks had been disrupted, managed to regroup. Without resolution of the underlying governance issues, they said, the violence would continue.

¶14. (C) Srisomphop and Sukri said the political distraction gripping Bangkok actually gave them some political space to outline a solution to the insurgency. Srisomphop said conceptually it focused on the need to give Malayu Muslims a bigger stake in their own governance. He said the paper called for the establishment of a "special administrative zone" in the South, within the context of the Thai state and constitution. He maintained that this was not the same as autonomy, but that it revolved around an elected governor, and would be similar to the special political status currently enjoyed by Bangkok and Pattaya. Srisomphop and Sukri acknowledged this may be a step too far; they advocated an initial step in this direction in the form of a Ministry for southern Thailand, with a Minister drawn from the ranks of elected MPs from southern districts.

¶15. (C) The academics were all aware of the increasing number of organizations -- international organizations, NGOs and embassies -- looking to fund projects in the South. Although there was no consensus on whether the increased attention was good or bad, both Ayub and Sukri pointed out that there was generally little enthusiasm for U.S. attention. "You need to understand," Sukri said, "the U.S. has an image problem." People in the South followed international developments and had an unfavorable opinion of U.S. policies, particularly in the Middle East. Ayub, who had traveled to the U.S. as part of our International Visitors program, said his perceptions of U.S. had changed as a result of his trip; though still wary, he now understood the U.S. to be a positive influence in the world. He said it would be beneficial to both the South and the U.S. to change this negative perception of the U.S.; he expressed a willingness to work with us, in conjunction with other IV grantees, on ways to improve our image.

JOHN